

The Sweetest Swisher

I'm at 7-Eleven grabbing coffee for the long drive home and the kid before me is buying a tall energy drink. If I had to guess from the chain wallet hanging from his corduroy shorts, he has to be about twenty-two. The cashier ID's him for cheap cigars and he bops out the store to his hatchback. The kid's all grin and baseball cap as he tosses the pack to his squealing girlfriend on the passenger side.

"I haven't had a Swisher in years," I comment to the cashier, and decide to order a single.

I loosen my tie as I leave 7-Eleven. But as I walk to my car and untuck my shirt, I feel guilty. The wife hates when I smoke and even though two hours of traffic separate us at the moment, I still take a look around the parking lot to make sure Jen doesn't pop up out of nowhere.

I sit inside my tinted silver sedan, staring at the engine button. Then I glance over at the blinking break lights on the freeway onramp and decide to uncover the cigar. Back in the day, they were shrink wrapped in clear plastic, not this pink cellophane stuff, but as I slide its brown skin under my nose, that heavy sweet scent takes me back. Way back to when I didn't have a bald head and heavy eyes from a mortgage and two college payments. To when I listened to the radio for music, not for opinionated talk.

I inhale from the Swisher's sugary tip but as I breathe out, I'm thrown back to a memory from my younger days...warm summer night...drinks on a balcony...gorgeous honey with plentiful brown thighs...those sharp eyes—Noelani.

I met Noelani when we served tables across the bay from the Queen Mary. I remember the morning she submitted her application because I had just left Bryce with his mom and I was brewing decaf in the side station when Chauncey dropped a lemon from the slicer. He peeked

around the corner toward the front desk and whispered, “I’d hire that fine ass on the spot.”

To this day, Chauncey’s nickname—*The Sampler*—remains stuck in my brain. He earned it since he’d slept with whatever landed on his plate. Including a knuckle-throated German tourist with narrow hips who only took it doggystyle. So I kept on with my opening duties and didn’t pay him any mind.

But then the busser barged through the double doors. “*Aye!*” he said, dropping the silverware caddy on the steel counter. “*Tu es mi corazon!*” he said as if she

The busser was this sometimes-smooth Latin dude (even if allegedly he slept with his underage cousin) so I had to see who they were talking about. And standing there by the sushi bar was an absolute dime with warm skin tone and jet black hair. The manager accepted her resume and the kitchen window popcorned with white hats. While the new girl slid into a booth, I studied the plumeria print of her skirt, those poor flowers forced into bloom by her thick thighs. She had the kind that women fret about in the mirror but men love to squeeze beneath tabletops.

“That’s a bad chick,” Chauncey said.

“She’s the illest,” I said.

The busser wondered if she was Filipino and I told him she looked Hawaiian.

But when Noelani laughed, her canines showed. Both molar sized.

“Nuh-uh,” Chauncey grunted. “Her grill is jacked. I can’t do chicks with all this messed up,” he said, scrubbing the air around his mouth.

“But you’ll smash a fat chick under the pier?” the busser said.

“I’m saying,” Chauncey said.

“And don’t forget Hitler,” I added.

Later the manager shook her hand and the chase was on.

The Sampler wasn't the lead trainer so on Noelani's first day he didn't sit alone with her in the breakroom. I was close enough to glide a pinky over her wrist, my heart speeding from nerves and free espresso. My vision bounced around the room—from the stacked booster seats to the metal lockers, from the Employee of the Month frames to the empty kegs.

“You okay?” she said.

My tongue felt dry as a loofa.

“Hung over,” I lied, and cracked open the training manual. “First things first, you need slip-resistant shoes, black socks, and a wine key.”

While explaining the clock in procedure, I built the courage to lift my gaze. But each iris before me shifted a sea of grassy paint strokes that shored up yellow flecks of sunshine. Immediately my own pair of plain browns plopped down on the training manual as if it was a safety raft. Although during the restaurant tour, I breathed easier when we ate in the pantry. We sampled crab taquitos, lobster stuffed salmon, macadamia crusted mahi and for dessert we shared the crème brulee. But I was caught off guard when the tip of its chocolate spoon slid past her lips.

“Good?” I said.

She tilted her head back and moaned. The thin muscles in her caramel neck swallowed.

“This is the best thing I've ever tasted!” she said.

As we carried our dishes to the scullery, a dab of the sweet custard remained on her mouth. My black apron saved me from major embarrassment.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I felt like the trainee because I forgot ingredients, lost

my reading place, dropped my pen. I knew I had it bad when even the zit on her earlobe looked precious. Noelani went home for the day and I went to the freezer by myself. With no one else around, I unzipped my backpack and stuffed in a quart of milk.

That night, I microwaved dinosaur-shaped nuggets for Bryce. He had recently outgrown the wooden highchair I stole from work but since he'd tip back in his new plastic seat, I stabilized the legs by taping on cans of *Chef Boyardee*.

His mom was out for the night bartending. That was part of our routine since we only saw each other between shifts. The divorce had recently been finalized yet all the fees left us strapped, leaving us unable to move away from the other. And seemed like every time I thought I was close enough for a deposit, my car needed break pads or we were behind on Bryce's tuition.

That night he dipped a pterodactyl into a ramekin and said, "Wha whrong, Daddy?"

"Tired," I said.

He bit off the dinosaur's left wing.

"Whan to whatch Elmo-pa-woo-ah?"

No matter who watched Bryce, *Elmopalooza* would be played.

"Later," I said.

"When mommee comin home?"

"Drink your milk."

"Can I have i'creem?"

Dishes stood in the holder. She washed them and I put them away.

"Finish those raisins," I said. "Mommy said you didn't poo today. You gotta poo, dude."

He chomped off the head of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. "Can I sleep on cowch witchu?"

“You done yet?”

We showered after and then he ate mint chip while watching his favorite show. Never the type of kid to sing along, Bryce would move his lips instead. But sometimes, I could hear him whispering the chorus: “Be yourself...Easy as A-B-C...Can’t be no one else... Just happy to be me!”

For the sake of Noelani, I should have listened to Elmo.

When I saw her the next day, I kept it by the book and quizzed her on table numbers and entrée pairings. But while we talked, I found out she had played college volleyball until her ACL tore—surgery, rehab, all that—yet she was only a year away from becoming an elementary teacher.

I could have told her then and there that my son was entering kindergarten. Instead I told her snowboarding was my thing.

She shook her head.

“What about skiing?” I said.

“The sports are fine. I just don’t like mountains.”

“Mountains?”

“Yeah, they’re pretty much a phobia,” she said. “There’s some special name for it but all I know is I breathe funny when they’re around. Or say they’re in a magazine, I whip the page.”

I thought about my own weird hang up. For whatever reason, I couldn’t carry Bryce along the edge of a high surface for fear my arms would involuntarily throw him.

“Strange,” I said.

“Did you see the movie about that airplane that crashed into a mountain? And the

survivors had to eat their dead to stay alive?”

I nodded even though my knowledge of movies was limited to *Elmo's World*, *Bedtime with Elmo*, *Elmo's Potty Time*.

“My teammates freaked during the scene when the passengers cut off frozen chunks from their dead friend’s ass,” she said. “But I was in the theater that whole time covering my eyes, thinking, ‘Oh my God. Those mountains are ginormous!’”

Yet she was deep into Hip Hop like me and had been to more live shows than I owned burned CDs. That’s because while growing up in Hawaii, she had helped her older brother carry record crates into house parties across the islands. He never spun for radio stations but cracked into the Vegas club scene, banking six-figures a year without a high school diploma. Hearing about all the famous emcees she had met backstage, I fell completely in love. Because really, at that time—turn of the 90s—to find a nonblack girl who understood Hip Hop was the equivalent of a woman landing a man who hates sports but just *loves* musicals.

Noelani certified her training and while everyone else was drinking their tips at the pub, we were in her car, head nodding to break beats and arguing what mattered most in lyrics: skill or emotion. I rifled through her CD visor and she passed a picture of her brother in his backyard holding a Corona. She pointed at everything around him that was bartered from working private gigs—patio, fence, pool. But I kept looking at him, staring at his face. In comparison to Noelani, he was almost as pale as me.

“Your bro looks,” I said, “lighter than you.”

“We’re hapa haole.”

“Happy who?”

Noelani’s incisors showed.

“‘Hapa haole’ means we’re mixed. My mom’s from the main island but my dad’s German. That’s how I got these.” She batted her gems then slid a CD into the dash.

As I listened to her brother scratch, my finger pads rubbed the top of my knee. He had fast hands and was big into dancehall.

Looking back now, I should have mentioned my situation to Noelani then and there. But to be twenty-one and have to admit you’re a divorced parent and still living with the kid’s mom borders on you disclosing cancer. When do you tell? If you lay your cards flat during the first conversation, they fold up and—*pyung!*—ditch you on the dance floor holding the empty drink you bought them. I had made that mistake before and vowed never again.

During one of our private kickbacks in the empty parking lot, I was determined to tell Noelani about Bryce. But who knew that would be the first night we’d fog up her windows? Still, as I nibbled on her lower lip, the thought nagged me until I pulled my hand out from beneath her sweatshirt.

“What’s up?” she said, adjusting her strap.

“Something I want to say real quick.”

I looked deep into Noelani’s eyes and just as I was about to come clean, I lost my nerve in the sheen of her black hair. Black as a record. Like you could run your fingers through it and sample every track in her heart: the quiet slow jam, the up-tempo R&B cut, the underground classic.

“There’s a party Friday night,” I said. “Wanna go with me?”

The night of the party, I stood in full uniform telling Bryce’s mom that I had picked up a shift. I drove to the gas station after and changed into my jeans then stuffed the car seat inside the

trunk. The night hid the melted crayons on the floorboard and I picked up Noelani.

We entered the party together and smoke hit us in the face. Hovering beneath the red ceiling bulbs were nicotine clouds. The host wanted to adapt to European clubs for his upcoming trip so he bought two boxes for everyone to smoke. Near the bookcase, the high schoolers coughed like crazy but the pros in the hallway puffed three at a time.

But the first thing Noelani said was, “I can’t be in here.”

“Too smoky?”

She grabbed my arm, stared at the carpet.

“I hate cigarettes too,” I added. “Might as well inhale cardboard.”

“Get me out,” she said.

I scanned the room. No one was looking at her meanly but then I saw what bothered her. Above the couch was a painting of the Catalina Islands.

“That’s not a mountain,” I told Noelani. “It’s like our Hawaii.”

She shut her eyes and clamped my forearm. I placed her hand inside mine and guided her to the narrow balcony outside: two lawn chairs, a string of white lights, one cactus pot with a *Sublime* sticker.

“Need a drink?” I said.

She cracked her knuckles.

“Hold tight,” I said.

I coursed back through the party. The smoke was chewy as the pot brownies disappearing from the kitchen counter. I stirred two vodka-crans and tasted my finger, wondering when to tell Noelani about Bryce. In a year, his mom would be out of the apartment and Noelani would move in with us. I added more vodka to our drinks, imagining the three of us watching Elmo from a

comfy futon and eating cookie dough.

I couldn't have been away no more than two minutes from Noelani and guys had surrounded her like vultures. But one mention of the magic brownies and the balcony cleared.

“Uhhh!” Noelani said, followed by a sip. “That guy who was here, Breathasaurus, melted my mind when he bragged about his hundred-dollar tip. I had to lift my arm and smell my own deodorant.”

She pulled a pack of strawberry Swishers from her purse and we traded drags on the girly smoke. I chuckled because I had never lit one up before without gutting the tobacco and relining the belly with weed. But I'd given up on smoking weed back when Bryce was born; I needed money in the worst way then.

We ashed that first one and the scent blended into the warm night. My buzz settled in and the details began to stand out. Noelani's face was neon green from a text message and while her chin was down, I stared at her shiny brown shoulders jutting out her tank top. They looked like a bonus pair of small titties and as she kicked her pink suede Pumas on the stucco banister, her jean shorts dangled white threads. She had thick momma-thighs already and the only thing to distract me from the turtle inked above her ankle was the low banister, easy enough to step over. I wouldn't have dared held Bryce on that balcony.

“My old team is in town for a weekend tournament,” she relayed, her fingers attacking the little letters. “You have to meet them!”

First the friends, then the family.

“No doubt,” I said. “Your cup looks low.”

As I stood up, I just had to touch her shoulder. When I got back with a half-bottle of vodka and a carton of cranberry, we turned our lawn chairs towards each other and began to

freestyle to the music playing in the apartment.

At work, she and I had passed the time by scribbling rhymes in our server pads trailed by *dot-dot-dot* for the other person to complete. The rhymes were about anything. The dumber the better. I remember she wrote this one about an obese momma in a muumuu tucking lard pancakes in her armpit-pantry. Then, the rhyme hit a corner and we went back and forth about a drunk drowning in the Pacific Ocean while downing a six-pack of Pacifico. But since we were freestyling for the first time on the spot, we resorted to the simple style of Southern rap that was coming into style. Everything had to end with *'err*.

Noelani went: "I wave my Swisher in the 'err. Like I just don't k'err. So please don't st'err. Or you might get sc'err'd."

Afterwards, she caved her hands around her mouth to kick the cutest little beatbox for me. But as I took over from where she had stopped, the sight of her bare thighs between my jeans tripped up my tongue.

"That was wick-wick-whack," she teased, her fingers flicking across invisible wax. "Wick-a-wick-*whack*."

She giggled like a girlfriend with a secret and inhaled the Swisher, the skin on her clavicle sinking deep. Her smoke drifted toward the pier where diehard fishermen huddled beneath lampposts.

The sliding glass door behind us wiggled with the bass line and people were grooving. The foggy red light gave the room a soupy appearance, as if our coworkers were ingredients shifting inside a bowl of Manhattan chowder. For all I cared, they could have been in Manhattan staring up at us on giant screens because I knew at that instant my big moment had arrived.

"Noelani," I started, "I'm feeling you to a deep degree and—"

A fire truck turned the corner. Lights spinning, siren blaring. An upstairs neighbor had thought the complex was on fire and the party ended.

Noelani nor I could drive but the warm night was perfect for a stroll. With a corner-mall next door to the party, we were a hop, skip and a *Jack In The Box* from the beach. Curly fry scent in the air, the salty winds passing through the palm trees melted the ice inside our red cups. We held hands mitten-style, my thumb stroking her palm, and we journeyed beneath a sliced moon toward the bar. I was excited because upon our arrival, her friends—and future bridesmaids—would bear witness to our fingers interlaced.

I envisioned Noelani holding way more than my hand since her maiden name was horrible to the ear: Hortchenberger or Hitlervragen. During the previous brunch shift, I had watched her face squint as she landed Mimosas on her tray and hurried toward a large reservation. The ocean glistened around her form while she listed the cuts from the carving table. The guests were smiling up at her from their chairs and I imagined her standing before Bryce's kindergarten class. I could even hear his small classmates greeting her in unison: "Hell-lo Miss-es Va-len-te!"

We were blocks from the bar as my knuckles slid down the moist lanes of her hand. A full squeeze and I said, "Can I tell you something?"

Noelani nodded as I explained everything, my practiced words spilling out like cereal.

But then she released my hand and said, "You-are-a-committed-father." Her drunken lisp had vanished and she sounded like a robotic telemarketer. "That-is-great-to-hear. Very-honorable-of-you."

Bla bla bla, yadda yadda yeah—I had heard it all before.

She walked ahead to the bar but turned to me at the door.

“James, this is like...weird. You have this whole other world to you I never knew about.”

Noelani hung out with her teammates while I found a barstool and plunged quarter after quarter into a Trivia machine I’ve never been good at. She was nice enough to introduce me to her friends, including a Brazilian beach player in a zipped up Adidas sweatshirt who was square in the shoulders as the pool table they all played on.

When the bartender said it was last call, I hoped Noelani would come to her senses and walk with me so we could talk more. But it was too late because she was grinding against the pro volleyball player. And to top it all off, they were dancing next to a Coors Light poster, Noelani oblivious to the Rocky Mountains stretched to the ceiling. When I saw that, the Long Island in my hand slipped and became a long puddle.

Chauncey agreed to pick my drunk ass up since I promised to buy him a turkey sandwich at work. Rolling down PCH on the drive to his place in Huntington Beach, I shoved my head out the window and screamed my love for Noelani.

“You’re retarded,” he complained. “Other oceans, other motions.”

“You don’t understand,” I blabbered. “You don’t understa-*a-a*-nd!”

In his apartment, Chauncey guided me into his bathroom and left me to wobble in the dark, splashing pee all over the tile. I plopped down on the soaked seat yet my mind replayed the worst part of that night: my kisses stolen by another guy. While lost in agony, I teetered from the toilet and landed in the bathtub.

“Fuck Noelani!” I yelled, shoving the shower curtain from my face. “That snaggletooth bitch!”

“Quiet!” Chauncey said, and flipped the brightest light ever. “Don’t wake my

roommate.”

Hot piss drenched my jeans. I fell asleep.

After that night, Noelani and I stopped scribbling to each other. No more hangouts in her car either. In fact, she quit months later and I skipped her bon voyage party. Heard it was fun—luau theme, beer pong—but I was busy checking off school supplies at the ninety-cent store for Bryce’s first day.

From that point forward, I was straight up with girls since they would find out I had a kid anyways. So on my second date with Jen, I explained, “Okay, here’s my deal.”

She listened intently, more so than Noelani had, yet for a moment, I lost track of my thoughts. The truth was unfolding before my eyes: boy tells girl about son, boy loses girl, after girl after girl after girl—enduring the scratch in his life’s record—until his son turns eighteen and marries a sweet girl before dear old dad can.

I stopped talking and braced for Jen’s rejection but she told me about her daughter who was a little bit older than Bryce. Years later, we tied the knot and became known as the downsized Brady Bunch to family and friends.

My phone’s ringing now, removing me from that time in my life.

Jen’s on my caller ID.

“Long day,” I answer.

“I picked up a rotisserie chicken,” she says. “Want me to pack your lunch?”

I look across the parking lot and notice the young couple in the hatchback. Their windows are rolled up. The boy passes the Swisher to the girl.

“Sure,” I say near whisper.

“I bought avocados to make guacamole with Tapatio,” Jen says.

“Good,” I say.

“I know it’s been a long week for you but Sunday will be fun!”

I’m quiet, clueless. I try to recall if Sunday is our anniversary. The cigar heats my fingertips.

“Sunday is Father’s Day,” she reminds me. “Hey, you okay?”

“I hate traffic.”

“Roll down your windows and stay awake. When you get here, I’ll light the massage candle and open a bottle of red.”

I get off the phone with Jen and roll the cigar between my fingertips. I take a final puff and flip the nub onto the cement but while holding in the smoke, my mind slips back to that balcony...Noelani...the drinks...the salty air. My chest burns and I blow the smoke out the window, knowing that was my last Swisher ever.

I sip my coffee and start the engine. As I drive past the kid’s smoky car, I give him a nod.

I blend back into the traffic.